DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 260 EC 202 459

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TITLE An Examination of "Critical Teaching Skills" Present and Absent in First Year Special Education Teachers.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (15th, Memphis, TN, November 19-21, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; *Disabilities; Higher Education; Observation; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Practicums; *Preservice Teacher Education; Research; *Special Education Teachers; Student Behavior; Student Evaluation; *Teacher Education Curriculum; Teacher Educators; Teacher Evaluation; Teacher Qualifications; Teaching Methods; *Teaching Skills

ABSTRACT

Responses from 143 individuals to a questionnaire mailed to 180 special education administrators from all regions of the country found that many first-year teachers enter the profession lacking skills critical to successful teaching and that those with only undergraduate degrees are at greater risk for failure than those with graduate training. Recommendations for modifying teacher education programs to correct shortcomings perceived by these administrators include: (1) increasing research requirements in undergraduate and graduate special education programs; (2) increasing credit-hour requirements for practicum experiences; (3) requiring extensive practicum experiences associated with all methods courses; (4) providing courses/programs to develop parent interaction skills; (5) exposing students to successful teachers who employ widely divergent instructional techniques; (6) requiring training and practical experience in use of observational measurement techniques and behavior analysis; (7) developing linkages with local and regional public schools as information sources on specific organizational/administrative practices; and (8) requiring all university faculty who teach methods courses to return at regular intervals to 180 special education administrators from all regions of the (every 3-5 years) to public school classrooms for an entire academic year. (VW)

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An Examination of "Critical Teaching Skills" Present and Absent in First Year Special Education Teachers

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Introduction

The quality and nature of public education in the United States is currently a key issue in the educational arena. Improving the quality of public education through improving teacher education programs has been the primary focus of much writing and retoric. The Holmes and Carnegie Reports (1986) have attempted to address the issue by providing guidelines for Colleges of Education to facilitate the development innovative and highly skilled instructors for the nation's youth. However, these documents appear to address general needs rather than specific teacher competencies. In addition, the reports tend to focus on the educational mainstream and ignore the area of special education. According to Defino and Hoffman (1984) successful programs of teacher preparation must possess behaviorally stated competencies for those in the training program.

Educational professionals address specific competency areas which are critical to successful teaching. The Virginia State Department of Education (1984) lists adjustment to teacher roles related to discipline, grading, and parent interaction as the primary areas of teacher concern. Hunter and Haines (1983) also emphasize parent interaction skills, classroom management, and evaluation of student work as competency areas of concern for teachers. These authors also list planning and organizational skills as critical to successful teaching. Roper, et. al., (1985) provide a somewhat different perspective on the needs of teachers as related to successful classroom performance. The authors list an increased awareness of learning theories and the relationship of such theories to instruction

as a teacher need critical to successful teaching. Though the various authors disagree upon the specific competencies necessary for successful teaching, there is a concensus that teacher educators must clearly state and evaluate mastery of those competencies associated with their program in observable and measurable terms.

Research during the past two decades has tended to single out beginning teachers by showing the initial year in the field to be the critical transition point in the profession. Armstrong (1983) and Hoffman and Defino (1985) feel that the first year of teaching has become the "proving ground" for demonstrating teacher competencies. Indeed, researchers find a great number of teachers leaving the profession during the initial years. Clayton (1976) reported the rate of nonreturning teachers to be 25% for the first year. Lagona (1970) and Ryan (1970) stated that the rate of nonreturning teachers was over 50% during the first two years of work. According to Clayton and Wilson (1984) these rates have remained relatively stable over the last decade. Clearly, first year teachers enter the profession "at risk" for failure.

This study attempts to delineate those critical teaching skills or competencies first year special education teachers bring to the classroom and those critical teaching skills or competencies that they lack. The study also examines differences in critical teaching skills with respect to level of education (i.e., graduate vs. undergraduate training). The identification of critical teaching skills present and absent in first year special education teachers can aid teacher educators in improving graduate and undergraduate

preservice programs. The improvement of teacher education programs to develop competencies critical to successful teaching could enhance the classroom performance of first year special education teachers, reduce the rate of attrition among new special education teachers, and improve the quality of special education in the public schools.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to delineate those skills or competencies critical to successful teaching present and absent in first year special education teachers. Differences in those competencies present and absent in first year special education teachers were examined with respect to the level of training in the subjects (i.e., graduate vs. undergraduate education).

Research Questions

This study was structured to answer the following research questions:

1. What critical teaching skills are present in first year special education teachers with undergraduate degrees?
2. What critical teaching skills are absent in first year special education teachers with undergraduate degrees?
3. What critical teaching skills are present in first year special education teachers with graduate degrees?
4. What critical teaching skills are absent in first year special education teachers with graduate degrees?

Subjects and Setting

The subjects in this study were public school administrators in 12 states who were primarily responsible for supervising the districts'

special education programs. One hundred forty-three (143) special education administrators responded to the survey instrument. One hundred eighty (180) survey instruments were mailed out (15 forms to each state). Thirty-six percent (36%) of the respondents were from rural school districts and 64% of the respondents were from urban school districts. The states from which the sample was drawn were randomly selected and represented all geographic regions of the country.

Method

During the fall semester of 1985 questionnaires were mailed to a randomly selected group of administrators in each state included in the study. The administrators were selected from lists of school districts provided by each state's Department of Education.

The subjects were asked to respond to the instrument by listing a maximum of three skills they felt to be critical to successful teaching which were present in their first year special education teachers and a maximum of three skills critical to successful teaching absent in these teachers. The administrators were asked to differentiate between teachers with graduate or undergraduate degrees in terms of critical skills present and absent. There were 143 respondents to the survey (79% of the total). The responses were analyzed to answer the research questions.

Results

The specific critical teaching skills obtained on the survey instrument were ranked according to the frequency with which they were listed by the respondents. These rankings and their associated

percentage of occurance are presented in Tables I-IV. Only critical teaching skills occurring at a rate of 30% or better among the respondents were ranked in the tables.

Table I

Critical Teaching Skills Present in First Year Special Education Teachers with Undergraduate Degrees

Skill	Percentage of occurance among respondents
Effective of interpersonal skills	70%
Knowledge of learning theory	58%
Knowledge of teaching techniques	56%
Ability to write instructional objectives	38%

Table II

Critical Teaching Skills Absent in First Year Special Education Teachers with Undergraduate Degrees

Skill	Percentage of occurance among respondents
Ability to collect and interpret baseline/post intervention data	68%
Ability to individualize instruction	57%
Ability to understand and apply research findings	51%
Ability to analyze specific hearing problems	51%
Ability to apply theory to practice	49%
Ability to employ an organized sequence of instruction	42%
Ability to use a variety of techniques	40%
Ability to interact effectively with parents	36%
Ability to write an appropriate IEP	32%
Ability to effective use of classroom management discipline techniques	31%

Table III

Critical Teaching Skills Present in First Year Special

Education Teachers with Graduate Degrees

Skill	Percentage of occurance among respondents
Ability to collect and interpret baseline/post intervention data	69%
High level of professional ethics	62%
Ability to interact effectively with parents	51%
Ability to analyze specific learning problems	48%
Effective use of classroom management (discipline) techniques	46%

Table IV

Critical Teaching Skills Absent in First Year Special Education Teachers with Graduate Degrees

Skill	Percentage of occurance among respondents
Ability to individualize instruction	67%
Ability to use a variety of teaching techniques	57%
Ability to apply theory to practice	52%
Ability to understand and apply research findings	35%

Summary and Recommendations

Based upon the findings of this study it seems clear that many first year teachers enter the profession lacking skills critical to successful teaching. Teachers with undergraduate degrees appear to enter the profession at greater risk for failure than those with graduate degrees (based upon the higher number and frequency at which critical teaching skills are absent in their repertoires). Currently teacher education programs in special education do not seem to address the needs of public education as perceived by administrators. It appears that teacher education programs are producing practitioners who are unprepared to function in the profession.

Several recommendations are offered for the modification of teacher education programs to meet the shortcomings perceived by special education administrators. These include:

1. Increase the research requirement in undergraduate and graduate special education programs. According to Calder, Justen and Waldrop (1986) undergraduate students in education take few, if any, research courses in contrast to fields such as psychology in which several research courses (even at the undergraduate level) are required. Increasing the research requirement could enhance the student's ability to understand and apply research findings.

2. Increase the credit hour requirement for practicum experiences. The greater the amount of time the student

spends with handicapped children in actual classroom situations, the greater the degree to which critical teaching skills can be developed.

3. Require extensive practicum experiences associated with all methods courses at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Methods courses should not (as they do now) emphasize classroom lecture and use the practicum as support for these lectures. The reverse should be true. The focus of teacher education should be on application of theoretical knowledge acquired in the lecture to actual situations in the practicum.

4. Provide courses/programs which allow for the development and acquisition of parent interaction skills. These programs should include observation of actual parent-teacher interactions and practice of the skills in simulated situations.

5. Design practicum experiences to insure that students are exposed to successful teachers who employ widely divergent instructional techniques in their classes. This should increase the likelihood that students will employ a wide variety of instructional techniques when they enter the field.

6. Require training and practical experience in the use of observational measurement techniques and the

analysis of behavior in both graduate and undergraduate programs. This should increase the likelihood that students will be more proficient in collecting and interpreting baseline and post intervention data.

7. Develop linkage with local and regional public schools as sources of information as to their specific organizational/administrative practices and incorporate this into existing classes. This practice can enhance the effectiveness of new teachers entering these districts and reduce the need for inservice/induction programs.

8. Require all university faculty who teach methods courses to return at regular intervals (every three to five years) to the public school classroom for an entire academic year. This should make teacher educators more cognizant of specific skills critical to successful teaching and of instructional methods which are currently effective in educational situations.

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